

Top 10 Outrageous VA Behaviors

In addition to “cooking the books,” botching and covering-up appointment wait time records, and handing out undeserved bonus awards, misconduct within the Department of Veterans Affairs extends to everything from sexual abuse to skipping work to theft to drug distribution. Some examples of the Department’s most egregious employee misconduct are highlighted below:

1. Veteran Patients Suffer Sexual Abuse by VA Doctors

A male neurologist at the Colmery-O’Neil VA Medical Center in Kansas violated at least 5 female patients during his time as a physician there by conducting unnecessary “breast examinations” and at least one unnecessary “pelvic examination.” It took the VA more than 2 years to fire him and he is now a registered sex offender.

2. VA Employee Sells Cocaine and Ecstasy to Patients Recovering from Substance Abuse

A VA employee in Massachusetts sold cocaine to patients receiving treatment for substance abuse problems. 28 year-old Patrick McNulty sold cocaine, marijuana and ecstasy to the veterans he was treating on VA property. He was also recorded talking about his drug sales, once stating “I can get coke like it’s nothing. I can get more coke all day.” He was sentenced to three months community confinement in a halfway house, followed by three months of home confinement and three years of probation.

3. VA Employees Skip Work More Than Other Federal Employees

VA employees fail to show up for work unexcused – termed “absent without leave” (AWOL) – at a rate exceeding every other federal department and agency. AWOL can include anything from being late to work to disappearing from the office for months at a time. In one instance, lack of supervision enabled a VA employee to be absent without leave on more than 25 separate occasions. This employee took advantage of the “unlimited freedom” allowed by his supervisors and “admitted that his misconduct negatively affected his performance.”

4. Nurse Aide Steals Gold Crucifix Off the Neck of Dying Veteran

A nurse’s aide at a VA medical facility in Pennsylvania was arrested for stealing a 14-carat gold chain with a crucifix off of the neck of a dying veteran who was in hospice care. He attempted to sell the valuable necklace at a jewelry store; the veteran died the next day.

5. Child Pornography

On more than one occasion, employees at multiple VA medical centers were found to have used their work computers to watch child pornography. Examples include accessing child pornography websites on VA systems while on the job and possessing child pornography on the grounds of VA property.

6. VA Police Force Chief Plots to Kidnap, Rape, and Murder Women and Children

The chief of police of the Bedford VA Medical Center was arrested by the FBI and convicted of conspiring with a member of a cohort of the New York “Cannibal Cop” to kidnap, rape, and murder women and children. He pled guilty in January 2014 and “now stands convicted of serious federal crimes.”

7. VA Rehires Employee After He Drives Drunk and Kills His Co-Worker

During a business trip to Texas, VA employee Jed Fillingim was arrested after a night of heavy drinking. Fillingim admitted to driving a government truck while intoxicated, during which his colleague, Amy Wheat, fell from the moving government vehicle and died. Fillingim eventually resigned from his job but the VA rehired him – to a different position in a different office – just months after his resignation. He has remained at that job ever since, making over \$100,000 a year, despite being the subject of an ongoing criminal investigation into the Texas incident.

8. Lax Security Controls

VA had the most security incidents of any government agency last year, reporting 11,368 in 2013. “Security incidents” include anything from a stolen laptop to a computer virus download to the mishandling of documents. In one instance, a former VA employee was sentenced to six years in federal prison for aggravated identity theft. Former VA employee David Lewis accessed veterans’ personal information “in exchange for crack cocaine,” allowing this identifying information to be used to file fraudulent tax returns and apply for fraudulent lines of credit.

9. VA Employees Bills Department for Excessive Travel Expenses, Uses VA Laptop To Send Personal “Sexts”

A VA employee was placed on paid administrative leave after being caught charging his jet-setting lifestyle to the VA and only showing up for work when and if he pleased. He conducted personal business during his VA workday and took advantage of the lack of supervision. This employee also “downloaded and installed unapproved software to his VA-issued laptop for the purpose of sexting—defined as the sending of sexually explicit photos, images, text messages, or emails using a mobile device.” He downloaded Skype software on his VA work computer, using it to sext his friends, admitting his behavior was “out of control.”

10. VA Whistleblower Employee Suspended *Without Pay* When She Refused to Hide Wait Times

Lisa Lee, a former Navy reservist, was a whistleblower who sparked the Office of Special Counsel’s investigation into “cooking the books” scheduling abuses at the Fort Collins VA clinic in Colorado. The VA suspended Lee without pay for two weeks when she refused to cover up appointment wait times and relocated her to another VA medical center with lower pay. She said her supervisors claimed her “performance had delayed patient care.”

Top 10 VA Boondoggles

The Department of Veterans Affairs has the money to reform its health care system. In fact, the Veteran’s Health Administration’s budget this year is \$57.28 billion, which is equal to \$6,300 per veteran served. The following examples highlight instances where the VA carelessly wasted its resources:

1. \$600 Million + “Crown Jewel” Hospital in Nevada Not Living Up To Its Name

The VA constructed a new \$600 million plus (actual costs were reported as closer to \$1 billion) hospital in North Las Vegas that was coined “the Crown Jewel of the VA Healthcare System.” However, since its opening in 2012, the VA is now paying an additional \$16 million to expand

and update the emergency room as the original ER was insufficient to meet patient needs. Further, the VA hospital has been unable to adequately staff the medical facility with physicians, and many Nevada veterans still have to travel to different states for certain services and procedures.

2. VA Pays Out \$845 Million in Ten Years for Malpractice and Wrongful Death Claims

Over the past ten years, the VA has paid out \$845 million in malpractice claims. \$200 million of these malpractice costs were in the form of wrongful death payments in an attempt to compensate families of veterans' who died at the Department's expense. \$36 million was used to settle 167 claims in which the words "delay in treatment" were used to describe the alleged malpractice.

3. VA Construction Projects Rack Up Billions in Cost Overruns

In 2013, four major VA construction projects ended up costing significantly more than projected, accounting for combined cost overruns of nearly \$1.5 billion. Scheduling delays for 4 projects – in Las Vegas, Orlando, Denver and New Orleans – ranged from 14 to 74 months. On average, each individual VA medical facility construction project is 35 months late and \$360 million over budget.

4. VA Spends Almost \$500 Million on Conference Rooms and Curtains

Over a four-and-a-half year period, the VA spent \$489 million on embellishing its office spaces. Highlights of these "office makeovers" include \$6.8 million to construct one conference room in Illinois, \$1.8 million on office furniture in Puerto Rico, and \$10.7 million on curtains and draperies nationwide.

5. VA Spends Billions on IT with Mixed Results

The VA has spent \$3.9 billion on 32 IT investments this fiscal year (many of which are behind schedule and over cost – though the data is limited because of inconsistent updates and discrepancies within the VA's internal project management dashboard). In 2007, an investigation found the VA had the worst track record in the entire government for estimating the cost of IT projects. Over 90 percent of the time, VA IT projects ran over their initial budget estimates.

6. VA Pays Millions to Department Employees to Perform Union Duties

Many VA employees spend their days not caring for veterans, but rather themselves. "Official time" is a statutory entitlement that allows paid time off for government workers from assigned governmental duties in order to represent a union or its bargaining unit employees. As of February 2013, there were 277 VA employees performing as union representatives on 100 percent official time. In 2011, the VA spent \$42,565,000 in costs related to maintaining official time employees (this number includes payroll costs, salary, and benefits).

7. VA Spends Millions on Lavish Conferences

While veterans suffer waiting to receive medical care, benefits, and other services, VA employees are squandering funds appropriated to the Department. In 2011, the Department spent over \$220,000 on an 11-day conference VA employees at a Scottsdale, Arizona resort. That same year, the VA held two more training conferences in Orlando, costing a combined \$6.1 million –

with at least \$762,000 wasted. Questionable purchases at the Orlando conference included karaoke machines and artisan cheese displays, \$184,000 worth of breakfast sandwiches, \$16,500 for the production of “happy face” videos featuring daily recaps of conference events, close to \$100,000 worth of promotional favors, and \$50,000 for the production of a video parody.

- Note: While VA employees are lining up in buffet lines at conferences in luxury hotels, more than one in four veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are going hungry. A recent study surveyed 922 United States veterans and shockingly discovered that 27 percent reported they were not able to feed themselves three times a day. This number is “drastically higher” than the 14.5 percent national average.

8. VA Spends Millions on Employee Travel

In 2010, the VA spent \$80 million on travel-related expenses for its employees. VA spending on employee travel was brought to light in 2011 when the IG revealed that a senior VA administrator billed the federal government more than \$130,000 for his weekly commute to Washington. The VA not only paid for the official’s weekly commute, but it also picked up hotel and meal expenses so the individual would not have to relocate.

9. VA Spends Over \$500,000 on Artwork and Photographs to Decorate its Facilities

In 2013, the VA purchased \$562,000 worth of artwork to decorate various agency facilities. A VA spokesperson described the art as “motivational and calming, professionally designed to enhance clinical operations.”

10. VA Spends Millions on Vacant, Dilapidated, and Unused Properties

VA maintains thousands of buildings throughout the country, many of which are empty, unused, or too rundown to utilize – some of them are even considered to be health hazards. Despite this, the VA continues to shell out millions of dollars to maintain these abandoned and dilapidated buildings, including a pink octagonal monkey house in Dayton, Ohio. In 2013, VA estimates it spent approximately \$20.2 million on 922 vacant and underutilized properties.